Start

Retrieve Digital Media Content Using a Communications Network or Local I/O

Store Digital Media Content

Perform a Processing Function on the Digital Media Content

Provide the Digital Media Content to a Thin Media Client

End

A computer system including a processor and a memory for retrieving digital media content, storing the digital media content in the memory, and providing the digital media content to a thin media client is provided.
Start

Retrieve Digital Media Content Using a Communications Network or Local I/O

Store Digital Media Content

Perform a Processing Function on the Digital Media Content

Provide the Digital Media Content to a Thin Media Client

End

Fig. 2
SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR USING RESOURCES OF A COMPUTER SYSTEM IN CONJUNCTION WITH A THIN MEDIA CLIENT

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] The present application claims priority to and is a continuation of co-owned, co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/771,095 filed Jan. 26, 2001, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND

[0002] The disclosure herein relates generally to computer systems and more particularly to a system and method for using resources of a computer system in conjunction with a thin media client.

[0003] Media clients such as audio, video, and image devices are designed to perform a specialized function using digital media content downloaded from computer networks such as the Internet. To handle digital media content downloaded from the Internet or other local input devices such as a USB device or a CD-ROM, the media clients generally require significant amounts of memory, local storage, and processing power. For example, media clients that use real-time information such as streaming video or audio include enough memory to buffer real-time information to attempt to overcome streaming problems related to dropped packets and random transmission delays. The larger the buffer, the less likely that a user will experience delays when accessing the real-time information. Unfortunately, increasing the size of the buffer increases the cost and complexity of a media client. Similarly, increased storage or processing requirements needed for real-time information or other types of digital media content increase the cost and complexity of a media client.

[0004] It would be desirable to reduce the cost and complexity of media clients in a home network. Therefore, what is needed is a system and method for using resources of a computer system in conjunction with a thin media client.

SUMMARY

[0005] One embodiment, accordingly, provides a computer system including a processor and a memory for retrieving digital media content, storing the digital media content in the memory, and providing the digital media content to a thin media client.

[0006] A principal advantage of this embodiment is that it allows a thin media client to use the resources of a computer system in a home network. The cost and complexity of the thin media client is reduced by having the computer system perform many of the processing and storage functions of the media client. In addition, resources of the computer system not normally found in a media client may enhance the features of the media client.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] FIG. 1 is a diagram illustrating an embodiment of a computer system configured to communicate with a plurality of thin media clients.
[0014] Computer system 100 is configured to perform processing, storage, and/or buffering functions for thin media clients 110, 120, and 130. Computer system 100 retrieves digital media content for thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 using communications network 150 or a local input device such as a USB device or CD-ROM. Computer system 100 may retrieve this content in response to a user input at a thin media client 110, 120, or 130 or at an input device of computer system 100. A thin media client 110, 120, or 130 and/or computer system 100 may be configured to provide the user with a user interface to allow the user to select digital media content to be downloaded. The user interface may be a standard Internet browser or other user interface that allows the user to select digital media content. Computer system 100 may also retrieve this content in response to a signal generated by software at either a thin media client 110, 120, or 130 or computer system 100. The signal may be generated according to criteria specified by a user such as to periodically download a digital media file.

[0015] Computer system 100 is configured to perform processing functions on digital media content. The particular processing functions performed may vary according to the type of digital media content. Examples of processing functions performed by computer system 100 include transcoding, digital rights management, decompression, and decryption of digital media content. These processing functions may be performed after the digital media content is downloaded or during the process of downloading the digital media content by computer system 100.

[0016] Transcoding refers to the process of converting digital media content from one format to another. This process may include converting digital media content from one predefined format to a second predefined format. The transcoding of digital media content allows computer system 100 to provide a thin media client 110, 120, or 130 with digital media content appropriate for the particular client. For example, digital media content may be downloaded in a format that is not supported by a particular client. In this case, computer system 100 transcodes the digital media content into a format that is supported by the particular client. As another example, certain digital media content may be downloaded in a high quality video or audio format. Here, computer system 100 may transcode the high quality video or audio digital media content into a lower quality video or audio format for use by a lower performance client. By transcoding digital media content, computer system 100 handles a processing task that may otherwise be handled by thin media client 110, 120, or 130.

[0017] Computer system 100 may be configured to perform digital rights management for proprietary digital media content. Certain digital media content may be available only to select users, i.e. authorized users, who have paid a use or subscription fee, e.g. pay per view or pay per listen, for the content. A digital rights system ensures that only authorized users are able to access proprietary digital media content. Computer system 100 performs processing tasks to implement a digital rights system. These tasks may vary between different digital rights systems. By performing these digital rights tasks, computer system 100 handles processing tasks that may otherwise be handled by thin media client 110, 120, or 130.

[0018] In addition, computer system 100 may be configured to decompress and decrypt digital media content. Certain digital media content may be downloaded in a compressed or encrypted form. Computer system 100 is configured to detect compressed and encrypted digital media content and decompress or decrypt the digital media content. By performing these decompression and decryption tasks, computer system 100 handles processing tasks that may otherwise be handled by thin media client 110, 120, or 130.

[0019] Computer system 100 may be configured to buffer digital media content. Computer system 100 is configured to temporarily store digital media content in memory 108 prior to providing the digital media content to thin media client 110, 120, or 130. In this way, large amounts of digital media content or a continuous stream of digital media information are stored on computer system 100 and provided to thin media client 110, 120, or 130 as needed by performance demands or permitted by memory size constraints on the client. By buffering digital media content, the memory resources on thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 may be reduced.

[0020] Computer system 100 is further configured to store digital media content on a longer term basis in memory 108. For example, digital media files such as audio files for use with audio client 110 may be downloaded and stored on computer system 100. As a result, these files may be accessed from computer system 100 repeatedly by audio client 110. By storing digital media content on computer system 100, the memory resources on thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 may be reduced.

[0021] Computer system 100 is configured to provide user interfaces associated with thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 to a user. The user interfaces may provide the user with the ability to operate one or more features of the clients or may provide enhanced features associated with the clients. For example, a user interface may allow a user to set preferences associated with a client, create playlists of stored digital media content, manage a favorites list of digital media content, manage the amount of digital media content stored on computer system 100, select digital media content to be retrieved, or otherwise organize digital media content. By providing user interfaces associated with thin media clients 110, 120, and 130, computer system 100 may enhance or complement the features of the clients in addition to possibly reducing the amount of resources of the clients.

[0022] The above uses of computer system 100 provide examples of how the resources of computer system 100 may be used by thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 to allow the clients to avoid including redundant resources. Other examples where thin media clients 110, 120, and 130 leverage other resources of computer system 100 are possible and contemplated. The functions and operations of three example thin media clients, audio client 110, video client 120, and image client 130, will now be discussed. It is understood, however, that other types of thin media clients that perform other media functions may be configured to use the resources of computer system 100.

[0023] Audio client 110 is configured to play audio from digital media content. Processor 112, memory 114, and network device 116 provide audio client 110 with the ability to operate and communicate with computer system 100 to retrieve digital audio content. In audio client 110, device 118 may be any audio device such as speakers or headphones capable of producing audio and may be located externally or separate from audio client 110. Audio client 110 may be configured to play digital audio files or real-time digital audio information. The files or information may be buffered or stored by computer system 100 and may be of any format.
such as MP3, Windows Media Audio (WMA), Real Networks G2 or Direct Show compliant formats. Computer system 100 may be configured to transcode the audio files or information before providing the files or information to audio client 110. Computer system 100 may be configured to decompress or decrypt audio files or information prior to providing the files or information audio client 110. For Direct Show files in particular, computer system 100 may invoke codecs supported by the Direct Show architecture to perform tasks on the audio files or information prior to providing the files or information to audio client 110. Computer system 100 may also strip away decryption associated with a digital rights management system or perform other digital rights management tasks on the audio files or information prior to providing the files or information to audio client 110. A user interface provided by computer system 100 may allow a user to create playlists or songlists for use by audio client 110.

Video client 120 is configured to play video from digital media content. Processor 122, memory 124, and network device 126 provide video client 120 with the ability to operate and communicate with computer system 100 to retrieve digital video content. In video client 120, device 128 may be any video device such as a display screen capable of displaying video and may be located externally or separate from video client 120. Video client 120 may be configured to play digital video files or realtime digital video information. The files or information may be buffered or stored by computer system 100 and may be of any format such as MPEG1, MPEG2, MPEG4, AVI, Quicktime, Real Video, and Windows Media Video (WMV). Computer system 100 may be configured to transcode the video files or information before providing the files or information to video client 120. Computer system 100 may be configured to decompress or decrypt video files or information prior to providing the files or information to video client 120. Computer system 100 may invoke codecs supported by a particular architecture to perform tasks on the video files or information prior to providing the files or information to video client 120. Computer system 100 may also strip away decryption associated with a digital rights management system or perform other digital rights management tasks on the video files or information prior to providing the files or information to video client 120. A user interface provided by computer system 100 may allow a user to create video playlists for use by video client 120.

Image client 130 is configured to display images or graphics from digital media content. Processor 132, memory 134, and network device 136 provide image client 130 with the ability to operate and communicate with computer system 100 to retrieve digital image content. In image client 130, device 138 may be any image or graphics device such as a display screen capable of displaying images or graphics and may be located externally or separate from image client 130. Image client 130 may be configured to play digital video files or digital video information. The files or information may be buffered or stored by computer system 100 and may be of any format such as JPEG, GIF, TIFF, and BMP. Computer system 100 may be configured to transcode the image files or information before providing the files or information to image client 130. Computer system 100 may be configured to decompress or decrypt image files or information prior to providing the files or information image client 130. Computer system 100 may invoke codecs supported by a particular image architecture to perform tasks on the image files or information prior to providing the files or information to image client 130. Computer system 100 may also strip away decryption associated with a digital rights management system or perform other digital rights management tasks on the image files or information prior to providing the files or information to image client 130. A user interface provided by computer system 100 may allow a user to manage images for use by image client 130.

In other embodiments, multiple thin media clients that perform similar or identical functions may be added to the system shown in FIG. 1. These thin media clients may be located in different rooms in a home network, for example, and may further leverage the resources of computer system 100 by allowing digital media content handled by computer system 100 to be used with multiple thin clients.

FIG. 2 is a flowchart illustrating an embodiment of a method for using resources of a computer system in conjunction with a thin media client. In the embodiment of FIG. 2, digital media content is retrieved by a computer system for use with a thin media client using a communications network or local input/output (I/O) device such as a USB device or CD-ROM as indicated in step 202. The digital media content is stored on the computer system as indicated in step 204. The digital media content may be stored permanently or temporarily on the computer system as determined by characteristics of the thin media client and/or a user selection. A processing function is performed on the digital media content as indicated in step 206. The processing function may include decompressing the digital media content, decrypting the digital media content, performing a rights management function associated with the digital media content, transcoding the digital media content, or any other processing operation associated with the digital media content. In certain cases, step 206 may be omitted where no additional processing of the digital media content is needed. The digital media content is provided to the thin media client as indicated in step 208.

As can be seen, the principal advantages of these embodiments are that they allow a thin media client to use the resources of a computer system in a home network. The cost and complexity of the thin media client is reduced by having the computer system perform many of the processing and storage functions of the client. In addition, resources of the computer system can be dynamically loaded in a media client if the computer system may enhance the features of the media client.

Although illustrative embodiments have been shown and described, a wide range of modification, change and substitution is contemplated in the foregoing disclosure and in some instances, some features of the embodiments may be employed without a corresponding use of other features. Accordingly, it is appropriate that the appended claims be construed broadly and in a manner consistent with the scope of the embodiments disclosed herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A digital rights management (DRM) system, comprising:
   a processing system that is operable to be coupled to a global communications network and coupled to a thin audio client through a home network, wherein the processing system is further operable to:
   receive digital audio content over the global communications network;
   perform a DRM function that is associated with an authorized user on the digital audio content to provide authorized digital audio content;
store the authorized digital audio content in a storage device; and
provide the authorized digital audio content to the thin audio client over the home network such that the thin audio client may receive the authorized digital audio content as an input and output the authorized digital audio content without performing a DRM function.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the thin audio client is coupled to an audio device that is operable to receive the authorized digital audio content output from the thin audio client and use the authorized digital audio content to produce audio.

3. The system of claim 2, wherein the audio device includes at least one speaker.

4. The system of claim 1, wherein the digital audio content is received from a server coupled to the global communications network.

5. A digital rights management (DRM) method, comprising:
receiving digital audio content over the global communications network;
performing a DRM function that is associated with an authorized user on the digital audio content to provide authorized digital audio content;
storing the authorized digital audio content in a storage device; and
providing the authorized digital audio content to a thin audio client over the home network such that the thin audio client may receive the authorized digital audio content as an input and output the authorized digital audio content without performing a DRM function.

6. A digital rights management (DRM) system, comprising:
a processing system that is operable to be coupled to a global communications network and coupled to a thin video client through a home network, wherein the processing system is further operable to:
receive digital video content over the global communications network;
perform a DRM function that is associated with an authorized user on the digital video content to provide authorized digital video content;
store the authorized digital video content in a storage device; and
provide the authorized digital video content to the thin video client over the home network such that the thin video client may receive the authorized digital video content as an input and output the authorized digital video content without performing a DRM function.

7. The system of claim 6, wherein the thin video client is coupled to an audio device that is operable to receive the authorized digital video content output from the thin video client and use the authorized digital video content to display video.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein the video device includes at least one display screen.

9. The system of claim 6, wherein the digital video content is received from a server coupled to the global communications network.

10. A digital rights management (DRM) method, comprising:
receiving digital video content over the global communications network;
performing a DRM function that is associated with an authorized user on the digital video content to provide authorized digital video content;
storing the authorized digital video content in a storage device; and
providing the authorized digital video content to a thin video client over the home network such that the thin video client may receive the authorized digital video content as an input and output the authorized digital video content without performing a DRM function.

11. A digital media organization system, comprising:
a processing system that is operable to be coupled to a global communications network and coupled to a thin media client through a home network, wherein the processing system is further operable to:
receive digital media content over the global communications network;
provide a user interface including at least one organization function;
receive a selection of the at least one organization function through the user interface and perform the at least one organization function on the digital media content to provide organized digital media content;
store the organized digital media content in a storage device; and
provide the organized digital media content to the thin media client over the home network such that the thin media client may receive the organized digital media content as an input and output the organized digital media content.

12. The system of claim 11, wherein the at least one organization function includes a preference setting function that provides the organized digital media content with preferences that are set for the thin media client.

13. The system of claim 11, wherein the at least one organization function includes a playlist function that provides the organized digital media content including a playlist.

14. The system of claim 11, wherein the at least one organization function includes a favorites function that provides the organized digital media content including a favorites list.

15. The system of claim 11, wherein the at least one organization function includes a management function that manages the amount of digital media content stored as organized digital media content in the storage device.

16. The system of claim 11, wherein the at least one organization function includes a selection function that selects the organized digital media content to be retrieved from the storage device and provided to the thin media client.

17. The system of claim 11, wherein the digital media content is digital audio content.

18. The system of claim 11, wherein the digital media content is digital video content.

19. The system of claim 11, wherein the digital media content is digital image content.

20. A digital media organization method, comprising:
receiving digital media content over a global communications network;
providing a user interface including at least one organization function;
receiving a selection of the at least one organization function through the user interface and performing the at least one organization function on the digital media content to provide organized digital media content;
storing the organized digital media content in a storage device; and
providing the organized digital media content to the thin media client over the home network such that the thin media client may receive the organized digital media content as an input and output the organized digital media content.

21. A digital media organization system, comprising:
a processing system including a local input device and coupled to a thin media client through a home network, wherein the processing system is operable to:
receive digital media content from the local input device;
provide a user interface including at least one organization function;
receive and perform the at least one organization function on the digital media content to provide organized digital media content;
store the organized digital media content in a storage device; and
provide the organized digital media content to the thin media client over the home network such that the thin media client may receive the organized digital media content as an input and output the organized digital media content.

22. The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one organization function includes a preference setting function that provides the organized digital media content with preferences that are set for the thin media client.

23. The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one organization function includes a playlist function that provides the organized digital media content including a playlist.

24. The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one organization function includes a favorites function that provides the organized digital media content including a favorites list.

25. The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one organization function includes a management function that manages the amount of digital media content stored as organized digital media content in the storage device.

26. The system of claim 21, wherein the at least one organization function includes a selection function that selects the organized digital media content to be retrieved from the storage device and provided to the thin media client.

27. The system of claim 21, wherein the digital media content is digital audio content.

28. The system of claim 21, wherein the digital media content is digital video content.

29. The system of claim 21, wherein the digital media content is digital image content.

30. A digital media organization method, comprising:
receiving digital media content from a local input device;
providing a user interface including at least one organization function;
receiving a selection of the at least one organization function through the user interface and performing the at least one organization function on the digital media content to provide organized digital media content;
providing the organized digital media content to the thin media client over the home network such that the thin media client may receive the organized digital media content as an input and output the organized digital media content.